SisterVisions III • Through Our Eyes

SisterVisions III · Through Our Eyes
16 September - 19 November 2000

Art Gallery of Nova Scotia
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Henry B Rhude (1)
Guest curator: Pam Edmonds

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Cover:
Mary Lekea Ogaa, Uganda, 1946
Mother, (detail) 1998
oil on canvas, 152.4 x 152.4 cm
Collection of the Artist

Foreword

The visual culture of Nova Scotia's Black community has received increased recognition during the past decade as a result of artist and community activism. Long acknowledged for its rich musical and literary accomplishments, the Black community now celebrates the work of its visual artists as well. Recent exhibitions have introduced the work of artists from all segments of the Black community - young and mature, men and women, trained and untrained, those who have spent their entire lives in Nova Scotia and those who have chosen to live and work here - to a wide audience. Like other visual art made in the province, their work uses all art media and a vast array of approaches to image-making, but each work in an individual expression of both the single and collective reality of being Black in a predominately white society.

Some of the strongest voices among Nova Scotian Black artists are those of young women. Not only are these artists passionately involved in the pursuit of their art within a contemporary discourse, they are passionately concerned with their roles as women and particularly as Black women, in changing the role of Black women in art from that of exotic subject to that of articulate and observant activists and art makers.

SisterVisions III · Through Our Eyes presents the work of just such artists. Pam Edmonds and her colleagues have brought together an exhibition that counterpoints the exhibition of portraiture shown concurrently in the adjacent gallery space, **Through An-other's Eyes: White Canadian Artists, Black Female Subjects** (organized and circulated by The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, Ontario). The curator of that exhibition, Charmaine Nelson, also a young Black woman, looks at how Black women were represented throughout Canadian art history, as subjects, but never as artists. It was fitting that Edmonds chose to take a collective approach to developing an exhibition rather than a more traditional curatorial approach, and that we present an exhibition that continues the momentum of the first **SisterVisions** exhibition, presented at the Multicultural Gallery in 1998. This is the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia's first contemporary exhibition devoted to the work of Black artists and we look forward to other such exhibitions in the future.

Congratulations to Pam Edmonds, Rebecca Fisk, and their colleagues for producing this exhibition, and to Virginia Stephen, Deputy Director/Head of Programming, for inviting this response to **Through An-Other's Eyes: White Canadian Artists - Black Female Subjects.** Thank you to all AGNS staff who contributed to bringing this project to fruition, and to The Canada Council for the Arts who supported this AGNS exhibition through the Assistance to Art Museums and Public Galleries for Operations and Programming in Contemporary Art Program.

Bernard Riordon
Director

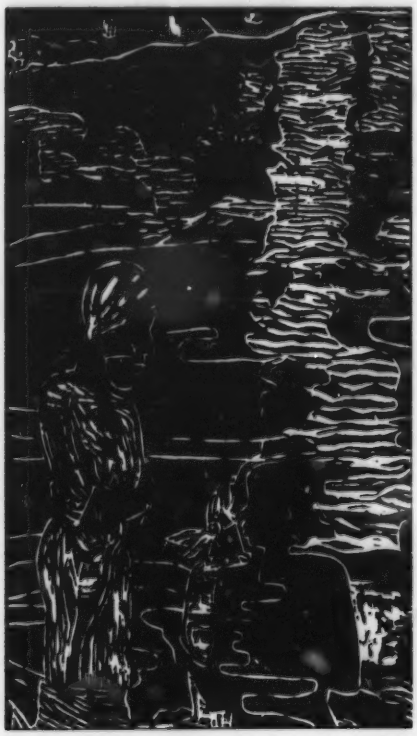
Acknowledgments

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those involved with putting this exhibition together including Virginia Stephen, Karen Brown, Judy Dietz and staff at Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. Special thanks to Annette Hurtig, Jim Shirley and Anthony Joyette for your generosity, encouragement and words of wisdom. Thank you Rebecca Fisk for your work, advice, and support throughout the years since the first **SisterVisions,** I am grateful for your presence. To the rest of the sister-circle– thank you for sharing your visions and voices once again; your patience, strength, passions and insight is a continual inspiration. Special thanks to all the mothers, sisters and daughters whose love and support will continue to sustain us throughout our triumphs and struggles.

PE

Introduction

We have to consciously study how to be tender with each other until it becomes a habit because what was native has been stolen from us, the love of Black women for each other. But we can practice being gentle with each other by being gentle with that piece of ourselves that is hardest to hold, by giving more to the brave bruised girlchild within each of us, by expecting a little less from her gargantuan efforts to excel. We can love her in the light as well as in the darkness, quiet her frenzy toward perfection and encourage her attentions toward fulfillment...As we arm ourselves with ourselves and each other, we can stand toe to toe inside that rigorous loving and begin to speak the impossible–or what has seemed like the impossible–to one another. The first step toward genuine change. Eventually, if we speak the truth to each other, it will become unavoidable to ourselves.
Audre Lorde, "Eye to Eye", Sister Outsider



Kim Cain, Toronto, Ontario, 1968
Baptism 1997
woodcut on paper, 64.8 x 48.3 cm
Collection of the Artist

I have quoted the words of the late and great Black lesbian feminist poet Audre Lorde because these words speak of the purposeful, challenging and very necessary task of putting an exhibition like **SisterVisions** together. As Black women, we also must strive to deal not only with how racist systems of domination continue to affect our lives, but also how patriarchal structures have subordinated and marginalized our expressive freedoms. As Black artists, it has become part of our responsibility to work harder to dispel the myths and stereotypes that plague our image. But to the extent that we have been constituted as "Other", it is important to insist on a vision of the world where we are at the centre rather than at the periphery. Facing the truth of our lives for ourselves, claiming the right to speak the truth of our realities involves putting ourselves at risk, but it is this "collective unmasking", this dedication to truth-telling which is an important and empowering act of resistance.

This objective of sharing and self-reclamation was a prime motivation for a group exhibition called **SisterVisions: Contemporary Black Voices** held at the Multicultural Arts Resource Centre in Halifax in 1998, a small yet strong exhibition of work that I organized with Rebecca Fisk. The aim of this initial project was to showcase the work of a group of eight emerging Black women artists engaged in contemporary art practice in Nova Scotia. Working in a myriad of artistic media, these individual voices offered their perspectives from a shared circle in a movement away from isolation towards building and sharing their creative strengths.

This exhibition became part of a yearly commitment to turn our visions into visibility for the Black female presence within the Nova Scotian arts community and beyond in order to develop a self-initiated and sustained discourse of our own collective voices. Though the presence of the Black community is strong and invariable in this province, it is only within the last few years that the active and historic presence of our cultural community has been recognized for its unique strengths and

Rebecca Simone Fisk, Calgary, Alberta, 1969
ABC's in the schoolyard when you're not white 1999
phototransfers on canvas, 6 panels, each: 27.9 x 43.2 cm
Collection of the Artist

versatility. With cultural pioneers such as filmmaker Sylvia Hamilton and writer George Elliot Clarke, and the curatorial and creative work of David Woods and Dr Harold Pearse, who organized the exhibitions of work by Black Nova Scotian artists in **In This Place** held in 1998 and **Home: The Art of Preston** held at Dalhousie University Art Gallery early in 2000, it is important to recognize that Nova Scotia is setting an important precedent within this country in the development and articulation of Black Canadian cultural activity and discourse.

Mainstream cultural institutions still have the power to render invisible and inaudible the images, stories and voices of ethno-cultural communities, their artists, and their activists through the content of their collections and exhibition programs. For most of our history in the modern world, the representation of Black people, has not been in our own hands, as is amply illustrated in the exhibition showing concurrently with this one, **Through Another's Eyes: White Canadian Artists, Black Female Subjects** (exhibition organized and circulated by The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, Ontario) . Because of this,

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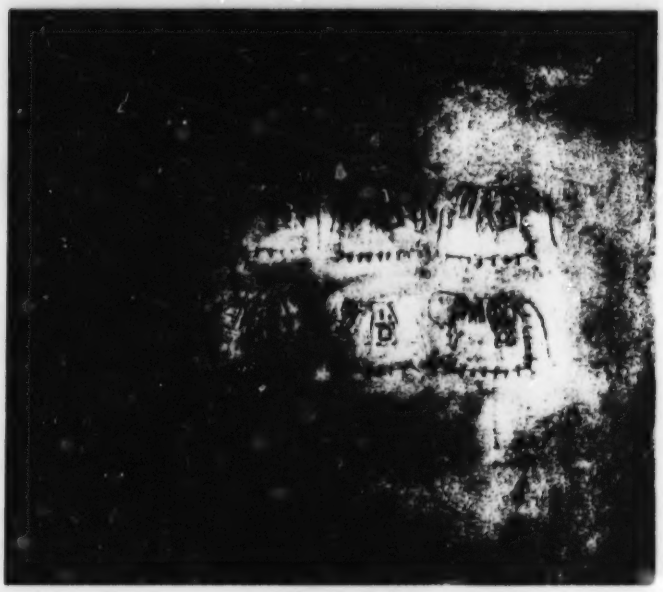
we decided that the work for the **SisterVisions** exhibitions would not necessarily be selected from a structured curatorial standpoint, but rather each artist would have agency over what images they felt represented what they were concerned with at the current moment and this would be the work shown. Last year, **SisterVisions II: Now You See Us** was held at the new location of the Multicultural Art Gallery in Halifax. The seven (six from the original group) artists' work dealt with issues of self-definition through self-portraiture. In the years since the first exhibition, many of these artists have continued to work creatively on other projects . Many have participated in showings of their work locally as well as nationally, while others have continued their respective practices as well as study, educate, curate and perform.

The current exhibition, **SisterVisions III: Through Our Eyes** includes work by many of the same artists that have participated in the first and second year's shows including Kim Cain, Lucie Chan, Chrystal Clements, Pamela Edmonds, Rebecca Simone Fisk, Mary Lekea Ogaa, Bronwen Trim, and Mkayuga Sulih Williams and features new work by Angele Gannon, who has recently moved back to Nova Scotia from Montreal, and who will be exhibiting with us for the first time. We will continue to work with differing notions of community, self, and representation.

Bronwen Trim, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1970
Untitled 2000
ink jet colour print, 50.8 x 34.9 cm
Collection of the Artist

The collective work is part of the ongoing effort to create a space for Black women's art that moves beyond celebratory expositions which tout what Black Canadian critic Rinaldo Walcott refers to as the "seduction of firstness". Though no monolithic quality defines the style of the work these artists are presenting, the range of shared history and material conditions validates a relevant venue to articulate the myriad of their individual experiences as artists, as women, as members from various communities and positions. We are not speaking *for* Black women but *as* Black women.



Chrystal Clements, Gibson Woods, Nova Scotia, 1974
Aprons 1996
mixed media on canvas, 76.2 x 101.6 cm
Collection of the Artist

This show brings together new work as well as work from the previous history of **SisterVisions** exhibitions. The artists here are sharing their skills, visions, and voices from a variety of positions and communities. Much of the work presented does focus on the female figure and form, whether abstracted or representational. Angele Gannon's painted clay sculptures represent the female figure in expressive movement and form. Mkauyga Sulih Williams' spirited works also often incorporates the female figure in strong light and colour. The central female figure is often an ethereal being, a presence imbued with the landscape. In Mary Lekea Ogaa's paintings and prints, woman is often teacher and nurturer, the mother who passes on skills and knowledge. The Black female figure is a strong presence, as in her painting entitled *Mother*, where we are faced with the intensity of a full frontal gaze of a larger than life woman's face. Through simple line drawings Lucie Chan creates a community of people from imagination and memory whose personalities and presence create familiar narratives. Bronwen Trim's digital prints and photographs create a powerful range of imagery which includes Halifax drag queens and musicians, while Kim Cain's work highlights community often with a sense of homeplace, as in her woodcut called *Baptism*.

Chrystal Clements, whose work is directly connected to her upbringing in the small Black rural community of Gibson Woods, Nova Scotia, has been concerned with the role of Mother in Black families a the primary caregiver, and authority figure. Using simple, iconic symbols and a minimal palette of earth tones, she incorporates household materials and methods in her work to echo the ritualistic nature of familial storytelling. In her newest work, she deals with colour consciousness as it relates to issues and miscegenation and beauty culture.

Rebecca Fisk's work centres around the notion of the female body in relation to challenging both historical and contemporary racist and sexist attitudes. In her work, she references her personal as well as our collective memories as a people to gain control over racist language and imagery and transform it into one that is

SISTERS OF CHANGE

LOOK BACK JUST ONCE MY SISTERS,

AND WITNESS FOR YOURSELF

THE TRYING ROAD WE'VE COME.

THE SHAME, THE DENIAL, COMPROMISES

AND SELF-REGRET.

UNDERESTIMATIONS, MISUNDERSTOOD,

OVERLOOKED, AND UNDERPAID.

BUT RISE UP MY SISTERS, THIS IS BUT THE

NOURISHMENT OUR SOIL

NEEDS TO FLOURISH WITH SELF-

EXPRESSION,

THE ROOTS FROM WHENCE OUR TREES

GROW TALL.

THE COLUMN KEEPING OUR BACKS ERECT.

RISE UP AND BE COUNTED,

MY SISTERS...

AMONG THE SURVIVORS,

THE FARSIGHTED, THE DIVERSE,

STRONG MOTHERS, SISTERS,

AND DAUGHTERS OF CHANGE.

EMPOWERED WITH SELF-DIRECTION,

THE PERSERVERING, EVER-EVOLVING,

DYNAMIC PENETRATING WELLS HOLDING

MILES OF WISDOM.

EVER LUCID EYES HOLDING PROMISE

NEVER TO RETURN DOWN THAT

TRYING ROAD THE SAME.

KIM CAIN

empowering. My own work deals with these issues as they relate to the Black female presence and reclaiming subjectivity of the Black female body through the "gaze".

Though the synopsis of the work is brief, one of the primary goals I see in developing this exhibition is to encourage the development of a Black Canadian cultural discourse whereby we, as both audience and creators can move beyond primarily reactionary positions in order to engage in aesthetic as well as intellectual critique, dialogue and debate about Black Canadian art. Claiming this discourse is no doubt a tool for empowerment in and of itself. Until that particular discourse is constructed, Black artists and their production will remain behind the veils of Canadian art history, but as we collectively activate our knowledge and power, we can inscribe new discourses on art wherein we can locate out histories and construct critiques that will appropriately inscribe our lives, production and interventions in this world.

Pamela Edmonds, 2000

Lucie Chan, Guyana, 1975
"It's different with you because I know you" 2000
pen on paper, 20 panels, each 15.2 x 8.9 cm
Collection of the Artist

I thought it was important to end here with the voice and visions of Rebecca Fisk, with whom I worked with from the beginning to develop and sustain the **SisterVisions** *exhibitions through these past years.*
PE

SisterVisions: Contemporary Black Voices began in 1998 with the propitious meeting of Pamela Edmonds and myself. Through the organization of this exhibition, our mutual objective was to bring to light the talent that existed within Nova Scotia regarding Black female artists. We mostly see images of Black people that reinforce and perpetuate the accepted desired subjugation and subordination of Black bodies by white bodies. These are the images that have portrayed us for centuries. These are the images that **SisterVisions** desires to change. The artists of **SisterVisions** question the assumptions of 'What you see is what you get...' by demanding that the viewers take another closer look. Our work is not necessarily about interrogation, nor is it about reproach, it is about generating a space for our images that resist stereotypes and challenge the artistic imagination. The works of **SisterVisions** are both progressive and provocative because of the way we call attention to the aspects of Black female identity that have tended to become erased and overlooked in a racist, sexist society. Some of us struggle with the notions of identity, representation, and racism. Others speak of the empowerment of Black women, of us. We empower ourselves through the use of visual imagery and language. We invite the viewers to take a closer look, to see the many levels that exist within our work and ourselves. We write about art, we make art, but we no longer want to allow ourselves to become objectified. Using our images, we connect ourselves to a recuperative, redeeming recollection that enables us to devise radical identities, and images of ourselves that surpass the limits of the colonizing eye.

Rebecca Simone Fisk, 2000

List of works

(All measurements height preceding width)
All artists are currently residents of
Nova Scotia

Lucie Chan
Guyana, 1975

Pass Four (Pass For) 1999
charcoal on paper, 205.7 x 76.2 cm
Collection of the Artist

"It's different with you because I know you" 2000
pen on paper, 20 panels, each 15.2 x 8.9 cm
Collection of the Artist

Kim Cain
Toronto, Ontario, 1968

Baptism 1997
woodcut on paper, 64.8 x 48.3 cm
Collection of the Artist

Sister of Change 1995
colour pencil on paper, 25.0 x 35.0 cm
Collection of the Artist

Chrystal Clements
Gibson Woods, Nova Scotia, 1974

Aprons 1996
mixed media on canvas, 76.2 x 101.6 cm
Collection of the Artist

Blood of my soul 2000
acrylic on paper, 57.2 x 75.6 cm
Collection of the Artist

American Beauty made for me 2000
ink, graphite, Covergirl foundation on paper,
57.2 x 75.6 cm
Collection of the Artist

Pamela Edmonds
Montreal, Quebec, 1964

Family Tree Ma(turn)al 1998
mixed media on wood, 12.7 x 8.9 cm
Collection of the Artist

Black Box 2000
video installation, dimensions vary
Collection of the Artist

Rebecca Simone Fisk
Calgary, Alberta, 1969

ABC's in the schoolyard when you're not white 1999
phototransfers on canvas, 6 panels,
each: 27.9 x 43.2 cm
Collection of the Artist

And when she stared into her Master's eyes 2000
mixed media installation, dimensions vary
Collection of the Artist
1600c-200c 2000
mixed media installation, dimensions vary
Collection of the Artist

Building Blacks 1997
mixed media installation, dimensions vary
Collection of the Artist

Angele Gannon
Montreal, Quebec, 1961

Strength 2000
clay, 7.6 x 15.2 cm
Collection of the Artist

Loving Warmth 2000
clay, 7.6 x 15.2 cm
Collection of the Artist

African Pride 2000
clay, 33.0 x 20.3 cm
Collection of the Artist

Dancer 2000
clay, 33.0 x 25.4 cm
Collection of the Artist

Mary Lekea Ogaa
Uganda, 1946

Seeing is Learning 1997
woodcut on paper, 50.8 x 61.0 cm
Collection of the Artist

Mother 1998
oil on canvas, 152.4 x 152.4 cm
Collection of the Artist

Empowerment 1999
oil on canvas, 76.2 x 61.0 cm
Collection of Steven Stone

Self-portrait in the Mud Floods 1998
oil on canvas, 152.4 x 182.9 cm
Collection of the Artist

We Live To Tell 2000
silkscreen print on cotton, 66.0 x 29.2 cm
Collection of Dominque Atari

Bronwen Trim
Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1970

Buck 65 2000
ink jet colour print, 17.9 x 43.2 cm
Collection of the Artist

Untitled 2000
ink jet colour print, 21.0 x 25.4 cm
Collection of the Artist

Self-portrait 2000
ink jet colour print, 27.9 x 35.6 cm
Collection of the Artist

Lolita, Lucy Furr, Nelly Fudgepacker &
D'amanda Tension 1998
black and white photographs,
4 each 20.3 x 25.4 cm

Mkayuga Sulih Williams
Kingston, Jamaica, 1960

The Oracle; She Who Hears 1999
acrylic on paper, 53.5 x 75.0 cm
Collection of the Artist

Girl Child; Lamentation Honour Song 1999
acrylic, charcoal, pastel on paper, 162.0 x 225.0 cm
Collection of the Artist

Pandora's Box? Dreamer's Basket;
Lamentations and Prayers 2000
mixed media installation, dimensions vary
Collection of the Artist

SisterVisions Collective

Gaining Ground: A transformative action
remembering and recognizing place and spirit
2000
mixed media installation on site